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ABSTRACT

This conference paper advocates that experiential learning provides learners with a deeper sense of knowing and self-confidence in taking risks to be change agents in their chosen fields. Five components of experiential learning are described: (1) there is an emphasis on learning-by-doing; (2) there is an emphasis on learning by listening; (3) internships are not costly in terms of careers; (4) recurrent learning occurs to gather new skills; and (5) this can be a useful management technique. An internship program is explained with examples from real life experiences. The roles of the three actors in the experiential experience are described: the facilitator, the principal, and the intern. A simple model for assessing the effectiveness of the experiential learning situation is included. (EH)

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EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION: A VIEW FROM THE TOP

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EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION: A VIEW FROM THE TOP

I. Introduction

Mary Ryan has introduced me as a university president interested in and supportive of experiential learning, thus the "view from the top" subtitle of this presentation. However, before sharing those "views" with you, I would like to lay out my credentials for speaking on the topic of experiential learning, especially in a political setting.

I have enjoyed a lifelong involvement with experiential learning. I am the daughter of a politician, so my infusion into political life began very early. Perhaps this early involvement would not meet the criteria of some of you or other coordinators of internship programs, but it certainly was experiential. When I was three-years-old, my Dad became mayor of our town after serving several years on the town council. In fact my younger brother was born on election day. So as Mom was delivering my brother, Dad was delivering campaign speeches. One of my early memories is of sitting under my Father's desk at Town Hall and listening to him conduct a council meeting. He took me to all kinds of meetings: meetings of the zoning appeals board, school board, rallies for town expansion, rallies against town expansion. I learned to be a good listener. I also got involved in my Dad's campaigns. These

skills, learned in this way, have been very valuable in my career.

That beginning was a major factor in my becoming a political scientist. However, I also learned early that I would rather study politicians than be one.

As a professor of political science at Queens College of The City University of New York, I directed the political internship program, which was part of a CUNY - wide program, for 15 years. When I felt the pull of academic administration, I first became a Chancellor's Fellow in the central office of City University, an internship program. Upon becoming a Vice President for Academic Affairs at Framingham State College in Massachusetts, I initiated a similar Faculty Fellows program in my office. Several of those fellows have gone on to be academic administrators, and -- with the lessons they learned -- several chose not to. Currently, I not only support experiential learning for undergraduate and graduate students, I also encourage West Chester University administrators to engage in forms of experiential learning as a management tool.

I am convinced that experiential learning provides us with a deeper sense of knowing and a deeper self confidence, if you will, to take the risks to be change agents no matter what our chosen field. I am reminded of the story of an eagle...

"The eagle gently coaxed her offspring toward the edge of the nest. Her heart quivered with conflicting emotions as she felt their resistance to her persistent nudging. 'Why does the thrill of soaring have to begin with the fear of falling?' she thought. This ageless question was still unanswered for her.

"As in the tradition of the species, her nest was located high on the shelf of a sheer rock face. Below there was nothing but air to support the wings of each child. 'Is it possible that this time it will not work?' she thought. Despite her fears, the eagle knew it was time. Her parental mission was all but complete. There remained one final task -- the push.

"The eagle drew courage from an innate wisdom. Until her children discovered their wings, there was no purpose for their lives. Until they learned how to soar, they would fail to understand the privilege it was to have been born an eagle. The push was the greatest gift she had to offer. It was her supreme act of love. And so one by one she pushed them, and they flew!" (1)

II. "The View"

The learning in experiential learning has a number of components. First, it emphasizes learning-by-doing rather than by reading, formal research, or attending lectures. Learning-by-doing requires the synthesis of earlier learning, a rethinking of previous experiences, a testing of skills and abilities, and working with others.

Second, experiential learning is learning by listening. Political science students are taught to observe, and make sense out of disparate data. In this field work situation, nuance, relationships, and other perspectives become part of the data mix. Those who write on participant observation as a data gathering tool often use the German word verstehen. Verstehen -- there is no

precise English equivalent -- means understanding-with-conviction, that one really does understand. By involving all the senses in the learning process, what one learns, one retains.

Third, experiential education is not costly in terms of careers. An intern is far freer to take risks and to learn from mistakes. The learning curve is relatively steep, in my experience at least, so students can maximize benefits in just a semester or an academic year.

Fourth, experiential learning is recurrent. Internships are not just appropriate for undergraduates. Certainly, we are all aware of internships in medical education. Graduate-level governmental internships in political science and public administration programs can also be important. NASPAA, the accrediting agency for public affairs and administration master's programs, requires an internship for pre-entry students and does not consider a master's level education for these students complete without one.

But experiential learning is more than a source of credits or a program requirement for students, and the benefits of experiential learning go beyond the student years. For example, the American Council on Education program has improved the preparation of a generation of academic administrative leaders. The National Urban Fellows program -- in partnership with the School of Public Affairs at Bernard M. Baruch College of The City University of New York -- has enhanced the management skills of hundreds of public and nonprofit leaders from diverse racial and

ethnic groups. These examples illustrate that we can all benefit from experiential learning throughout our lives. We can learn as much from failure as from success and everything in between.

Finally, fifth, I believe that experiential education can be understood as a useful management technique. Managers may take over someone else's job for a day to gain a better understanding of what a colleague does for a living. I encourage the administrators at West Chester University to engage in MBWA, management by walking around.(2) Many staff members seem very pleased with this form of experiential learning. Our staff and our operations have benefitted substantively as well as symbolically. For example, on one of his MBWA outings, the Vice President for Administration and Finance met with the custodians on the night shift. When asked what were their biggest concerns, they indicated that they felt isolated from many campus activities. For example, they had never been able to attend the President's holiday party in December because they work the 10:00 pm to 6:00 am shift and are not on campus when the party is held. So, come this December, an additional holiday party, running from 10:00 pm to midnight, will be added to our calendar. Of a more substantive nature, managers have been able to determine changing staffing needs by this method of learning and participating.

III. Effective Experiences

As a lifelong learner, the big question, from my point of view, is how to derive the maximum benefit from experience and, beyond that, how to create programs for undergraduates and graduate

students to produce lifelong learning skills.

The answer is, of course, a well designed program. The Institute for Experiential Learning, headquartered in Washington, D.C., has developed a program that embodies the components that I believe are essential to be considered well designed. IEL programs have the three critical elements suggested by Bernard Hennessey more than 20 years ago: "1. a real work situation as distinguished from speculation or simulation; 2. the opportunity for the student to participate on the same basis as other workers; 3. the opportunity for the systematic and continuous examination of the experience in relation to generalizations of political science." (3)

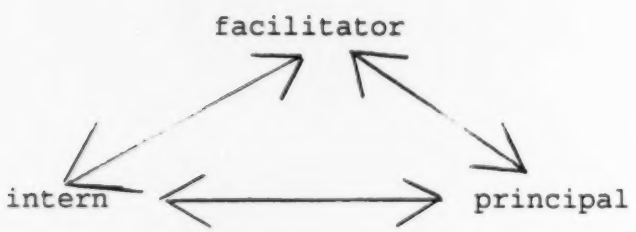
Explicit guidance is needed for both the individual intern and the host office/principal so that each knows what is expected. The principal must be comfortable and prepared to commit to the experience. The placement must be a good match of interest and personality. A political office may be eager for an intern, but unless it is prepared to meet the responsibilities of a host office, the placement will not be a success for the student.

Students must be made ready to benefit. Therefore, they should have prior course work and appropriate readings assigned. Students should be expected to make a special effort in their learning process. Daily journals and learning plans with timely feedback from the facilitator of the program can be quite helpful. Students should also be taught the techniques of being an active rather that a passive learner. Instruction in participant

observation techniques as well as in being a good listener is helpful.

The role of the facilitator is to provide the framework for the learning experience. Therefore, frequent meetings of interns and the facilitator are essential. Classroom seminars can help to bring the political experience into perspective, to relate participant observation to the formal literature on government and politics, and to provide the ancillary functions of ego support, the inculcation of scholarly discipline, and a feeling of shared experience with others in a like situation.

The Essential Participants
in Experiential Education



The triangle of experiential learning, then, consists of the facilitator, the principal, and the intern. Each of the three essential participants in that triangle must be in concert with one another:

-- The facilitator, or professor, selects individuals who, based on past course work and other factors, are prepared for the experience. The facilitator helps to further

prepare interns for their experience by providing the appropriate framework of readings and classroom activities. The facilitator has the key responsibility of the "match," pairing the intern with a principal. And the facilitator assists the intern to maximize her or his learning during the experience.

-- The principal must be prepared to provide opportunities for, to share with, and to coach the intern. The principal must be committed to the educational process to the extent that, as Hennessey states, the student is not only an observer but an equal participant with other members of the principal's staff.

-- The intern has her or his own set of responsibilities. They must be aggressive participants in their own learning. They should become informed observers as well as participants. Thinking critically about the ongoing experience and how that experience is linked to political theory is essential for the intern to maximize the benefits of the experience.

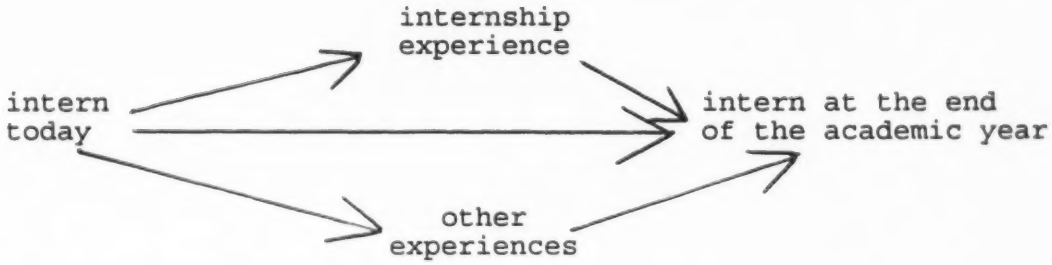
IV. Evaluating Experiential Education

It seems to me that any "view from the top" would include the topic of evaluation in connection with experiential learning. Faculty sometimes seem uncertain about how to assess the learning involved in this different setting.

There are two things to do to begin with: to admit that assessment is more difficult than in a typical course but also to indicate that we understand the model involved. The basic approach is to look for the growth in the student, the value-added by this

learning experience. So, let's begin with an undergraduate -- with certain characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, and skills -- and that undergraduate participates in an internship experience. As in any approach to evaluation, we are looking for change: in the characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, and skills exhibited. I should add that experiential learning is inherently inter-disciplinary, further complicating the process.

Simple Model for Assessing Experiential Learning



Now all three participants in the web of experiential education should have an input in assessment:

-- the intern, through structured assignments and through authentic self-assessment;

-- the principal, usually, based on an interview with the facilitator (the professor) rather than some written instrument or required letter, and

-- the facilitator, who needs to have multiple ways of evaluating.

The intern's journal can be a most effective device. It

cannot be just a recounting of the experience, but should include her or his analysis of the organization, its environment, and the internal behaviors, as well as the intern's reflections. Here growth can often be observed; for example, sometimes details seen early in an internship which seemed unimportant are later reassessed. Beyond this, at least in my own experiences in all three roles described, earlier knowledge is re-enforced, deepened or changed, attitudes about the nature of politics and the operation of public institutions become more sophisticated, and some skills are re-enforced or improved.

The gap between theory and practice, between the classroom and the "real world," in political science, the social sciences generally, and a variety of professional fields is greater than we often admit. Bright undergraduates may use the right terms and write fine essays, but their learning is normally enhanced by a period of carefully constructed experiential learning. The proof for some of you is that this even can happen a thousand miles from your campus in programs like those run by the Institute for Experiential Learning.

A president's perspective would not be complete without telling you that I "evaluate" internships in another way. For our universities, they are also advertisements; they put a face on an institution. For the citizens of Pennsylvania, it is sometimes hard to quantify a university's product. However, from a legislator or public executive or political campaign manager who has worked with an interested, well-prepared, always-learning

intern, the long term payoff for our institutions, in addition to our students, can be considerable.

V. The Case for Experiential Learning

Politics is an art, and political scientists study these artists to discern patterns in their behavior. Some political scientists "follow around" a particular "pol" for weeks or months at a time, in some ways not unlike an intern. And the insights can be remarkable, like several of the books by Richard Fenno.

Donald Schon talks about what "practitioners" "know." He says, "When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way.... knowing is in action."

Schon goes on, illustrating his point using an example from baseball. (I guess I've been missing baseball quite a bit lately.) "..A big-league pitcher's know-how is in his way of pitching to a batter's weakness, changing his pace, or distributing his energies over the course of a game." (4)

In addition to knowing-in-action, Schon also recognizes "reflecting-in-action," whereby practitioners build theories -- we might say -- about what works and what doesn't. And they often follow these theories for years.

In some ways, an internship is a master class, not with a painter or an artisan, a musician or a quarterback, but with a public official or a politician. Interns get to better understand, close-up, the art of politics. They get to better appreciate how

politicians deal with the uncertainty which fills their lives, how politicians identify and solve problems. Experience counts -- for politicians and, when carefully designed and implemented, for interns.

Undergraduates take 40 or more courses for their degree. The internship "course" is often one of the most important of these.

For most of us in life, experiential learning is our principal form of learning. The formal, systematically designed experience we are discussing at this panel can begin or re-enforce or even restart a critical lifelong process.

* * *

The eagle landed at West Chester University of Pennsylvania two years ago, hopefully prepared to learn from her most challenging experience yet.

ENDNOTES

1. David McNally, Even Eagles Need a Push (New York: Delacorte Press, 1990), pp. xiv-xv.

2. Adapted from Tom Peters. Peters refers to this as "management by wandering around;" I prefer to call it "management by walking around" because "wandering" does not imply purpose, and this effort is definitely goal oriented.

3. Bernard Hennessey, "The Nature and Scope of College Political Internship Programs: Survey and Commentary," presented at a conference sponsored by the American Political Science Association and the Ford Foundation, April, 1965, Las Croabas,

Puerto Rico.

4. Donald A. Schon, The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 49-69.